

BAHRAIN

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New breed of civil resistance to counter the Al Khalifa absolutism

The humiliating failure of the political programme of the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship has recently led to drastic steps by the ruling family in their quest for a face-saving exit from the ongoing political quagmire. Now that the Al Khalifa torture cells have been opened for the prisoners of conscience, the regime appears to be indifferent to its reputation outside the country. What makes the Al Khalifa more resolute in their rejection to democratise their autocratic regime is the Anglo-American policy of defending them without any condition. The long-awaited democratisation process that had been promised by Washington and London has now disappeared amidst the political and material rubble in Baghdad. It is a classic dilemma for those powers which, on one hand, build their international reputation on being "pro-democracy" forces, while in reality they are not ready to accept the popular verdicts that has often been to the disliking of Washington in particular. What the Bush administration wishes to achieve is the political initiatives that would ensure their allies would remain safe, while appearing to be a genuine drive to democracy. In the case of Bahrain, the US has recently come forward in an open fashion to defend a hereditary dictatorship that is beyond reform. The American Ambassador in Manama has been at the forefront defending the regime while the young innocent citizens of Bahrain are led to the Al Khalifa torture chambers for peaceful expression of their opinion.

The repression by the ruling family has been getting worse in recent months. In addition to twenty hostages snatched by Sheikh Hamad's death squads few weeks ago, seven more innocent young men are on trial for taking part in a peaceful demonstration against the Al Khalifa despotism. In recent weeks, threats have been pouring on the activists in various forms. Messages on mobile phones, summoning to the torture department, sending emissaries to active elements have been widely deployed in the drive to crush the growing civil resistance movement. Young men like Musa Abd Ali and Ali Mushaime have received serious threats from the torture apparatus of the Al Khalifa that they would face dire consequences if they

attempted to demonstrate during the forthcoming Formula 1 race. The race is the flagship of Sheikh Hamad and his son. Both have blundered the country's wealth on their lavish spending on themselves and their guests and friends, at a time when thousands of citizens lack the basic human needs of food and shelter. Jobs have been scarce as the Al Khalifa continued their policy of starving the people of Bahrain into total subjugation. What has annoyed Sheikh Hamad and his clique in recent months is the popular petition that has been circulating among the people for signatures. It effectively withdraws political legitimacy from the Al Khalifa regime after Sheikh Hamad tore down the only legal document that offers his family the right to rule. The 1973 Constitution provided a bilateral legal agreement between the people of Bahrain and the Al Khalifa which codified the rights and obligations of both parties as they seek to achieve peaceful co-existence.

Sheikh Hamad's evil political programme has led to the changing of the country's historic demographic balance to the annoyance and anger of tens of thousands of Bahrainis. He managed to contain or co-opt a number of leading personalities but failed to achieve people's allegiance to the rule of his family. He has retained the full team of the black era, including his uncle, the prime minister whose blood-stained hands stand a reminder to the people of the torture regime he had run, in conjunction with the notorious Ian Henderson. It has now become clear that both Washington and London are eager to defend the Al Khalifa whom they consider a historic ally. To their dismay, they have been turning the people away from their policies, and Washington, in particular, continues to bear the responsibility of defending indefensible clique.

The struggle has continued unabated during the recent months. In Ashoora, some brave people managed to highlight their predicament in the huge processions marking the epic of Karbala in which the Umayyad hereditary dictatorship slaughtered the family of the Holy Prophet, who had sought to reform

the political system. Sheikh Hamad and his close circle of advisors and family members are keen to pursue the political naturalisation programme to ensure total domination of the political process. At the same time, they have resorted to policies of threats and charm offensives in order to woo the majority Shia population into the trap of condoning the Al Khalifa document of 2002 which replaced the binding and only legitimate constitution. The country is suffering immensely from the misguided policies of the triad comprising Sheikh Hamad, his son and uncle. The rising unemployment as well as the level of poverty, disappointment and political strife are causes for concern to everyone, including the Americans and the British who are betting on the wrong horse. The next few weeks will be crucial to the two sides. First, the Formula 1 race which is due this month is likely to be disrupted by popular and peaceful activities by the victims of repression. Second the Al Khalifa are likely to be snubbed by those who are urging the boycott of the regime and to adopt a passive form of resistance which aim at widening the wedge between the Al Khalifa and the people of Bahrain.

Under the absolute rule of Sheikh Hamad, there is little room for manoeuvre. People have to decide whether to accept the rules and regulations imposed by the ruling family or join the civil resistance movement that is becoming widespread. Behind the façade of normality, the reality of the Bahraini situation has forced many, inside and outside the country, to re-examine their position. Today, the disillusioned youth are taking more active role in formulating the opposition and deciding on the options available to counter the brutality of the regime and its persistence in the policy of ethnocide. The expectations is that the before the end of the year, the newly formulated opposition groups will change the opposition horizon in line with the new local and regional realities. These groups need the support of the international community as they struggle against the hereditary dictatorship of the Al Khalifa. Failing to support the people of Bahrain in their struggle could only lead to more instability under the wrath of absolute monarchical dictatorship.

More threats, intimidation from a frustrated

The frustration among the Al Khalifa members due to the failure of their political programme has now taken new dimensions. In addition to the frantic efforts to woo the international bodies to their faltering programme, they have now resorted to threats and intimidation against the activists, especially those who decided to work outside their imposed rules and regulations. In the past few days, the men of terror working within the Al Khalifa establishment sent harsh messages to the activists through an intermediary. The message was that the activists are under continuous surveillance, the Al Khalifa were aware of their activities, they would not hesitate to take any acts of revenge against them and that they (the Al Khalifa) would not care about the reaction of the international human rights organisations who protested against the illegal detention of the Bahraini youth. These threats are now taken seriously by the activists who fear that the reign of terror initiated by Sheikh Hamad would continue and could escalate rapidly in the coming period.

Other threats were also transmitted to young activists in the popular committees. One of them has been told that he would pay a heavy price for taking part in the Committee of the Unemployed. More disturbing is the emerging evidence that the embassies of two major countries are taking active roles in promoting the Al Khalifa dictatorship through various means, including denying activists visas to visit their countries, organising seminars in support of the Al Khalifa dictatorial rule and putting efforts in forcing the people to be part of the despotic regime. One activist has recently been questioned aggressively by the visa section in one of these embassies about his political thinking and activities to the extent that he thought the embassy official was one of the Al Khalifa henchmen, and not the representative of the government of his country.

The frustration has been highlighted by the foreign minister in a recent interview with the Al Ayyam newspaper, one of the Al Khalifa mouthpieces. He expressed his surprise at the rising criticisms levelled against his family's dictatorial rule, arguing that they had done what they could. But he also conceded that his family was not ready to sign the two special conventions on political and cultural rights. This is a serious admission from a senior official of a system that claimed to reform itself. It tallies well with the criticisms by the opposition that the Al Khalifa had been bluffing when they talked of reforms, and that hereditary dictatorship is not compatible with modern democratic trends.

The foreign minister's mission in Switzerland and UK is to request the international NGOs to accept the dictatorial rule to which he belongs. Previously, the Al

Khalifa had paid money to persons and organisations in order to either silence them or get positive statements from them. This policy of deception is an essential part of Sheikh Hamad's programme. The recent arrest and unlawful imprisonment of Bahraini youth has been criticised by international human rights organisations which called for their immediate release. The Al Khalifa are becoming more agitated by their continued failure to achieve the support of the people who are becoming more disillusioned by their illegal practices.

Meanwhile, the signing of the popular petition which is addressed to the United Nations, by tens of thousands of Bahrainis has contributed to the state of nervousness of the Al Khalifa regime. It is the first time in 35 years that the people of Bahrain are withdrawing publicly their recognition of the Al Khalifa rule and calling on the international community to intervene in order to save the people of Bahrain from this brutal and backward system.

The Al Khalifa regime is worried about the prospects of high tension in the coming weeks as it prepares to host the Formula 1 car racing. This is the project of Sheikh Hamad's son who is the new Al Khalifa face to the western world. The race, scheduled for 10-12th March is intended to provide a positive image of the regime whose image had been tarnished by the despotic nature of the regime, its policies of repression and practices of torture and collective punishment. The people of Bahrain are expected to inform the participants in the forthcoming race of the true dictatorial face of the regime.

Terrorising young protesters

The ruling Al Khalifa ruling family ordered an attack against young boys taking part in a demonstrations against the terrorist acts committed against the Samarra Shrine in Iraq. They were taking part in a protest march on Wednesday 1st March that started from the Al Jabiriya Secondary School in Manama when heavily-armed police attacked them mercilessly, causing injuries to many of them.

Several young boys were taken hostage by the Al Khalifa death squads who were acting "on orders from above". Soon after the first demonstration was mercilessly attacked by the Al Khalifa killers, the students of Ahmad Al Omran's school took to the streets. They were also attacked and several of them arrested.

The riot police, which is staffed mainly with foreigners, deployed their arsenal of arms and caused injuries and terror among the young students who insisted on taking part in the protest against terrorism, and caused a great embarrassment to the ruthless police of the ruling family.

US Cautions its citizens in Bahrain

The US State Department has issued the following statement to caution American citizens in Bahrain of the forthcoming events including demonstrations and other forms of civil actions.

According to press reports, a number of political protests and demonstrations are planned for the period leading up to the Formula 1 Grand Prix on March 10-12, 2006. Such events can arise unannounced and unanticipated and may continue in the near future. All Americans are advised to monitor events in the local press and to be aware of their surroundings at all times. The following are potential upcoming events:

Friday, March 3: Possible march at 3:30pm from the Ras Ruman Mosque (near the Sheraton Hotel) to Bab Al-Bahrain (Manama Souq) and then back to the Ras Ruman Mosque

Saturday, March 4: Possible gathering at 6:30am outside the Civil Service Bureau in the Diplomatic Area
Monday, March 6: Possible gathering at 9:00am outside the Ministry of Justice in the Diplomatic Area.

Tuesday, March 7: Possible gathering at 9:00am outside the Ministry of Justice in the Diplomatic Area

Thursday, March 9: Possible vehicle procession at 8:00pm from Exhibition Avenue to the Al Fateh Highway Corniche.

Friday, March 10: Possible gathering at 10:30am in Sanabis near Al Dana Mall followed by a possible 1:30pm vehicle procession to the Bahrain International Circuit (BIC)
Saturday, March 11: Possible vehicle procession at 8:00pm from Exhibition Avenue to the Al Fateh Highway Corniche.

Monday, March 12: Possible gathering at 9:00am outside the Ministry of Justice in the Diplomatic Area
Monday, March 12: Possible vehicle procession to the Bahrain International Circuit (BIC).

We wish to take this opportunity to remind Americans of the PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS dated December 12, 2005 (Worldwide Caution) and December 15, 2005 (Middle East and North Africa), which reiterate the Department of State's continued concern of possible terrorist attacks, demonstrations, and other violent actions against U.S. citizens and interests overseas. Americans are reminded that demonstrations and rioting can occur with little or no warning. As the Department continues to develop information on any potential security threats to U.S. citizens overseas, it shares credible threat information through its consular (services).

Prison sentences for peaceful demonstration, and UN petition launched

One of the Al Khalifa-controlled courts has sentenced twelve Bahrainis to two years imprisonment for exercising their rights of peaceful congregation and expression. The Court, whose verdicts are determined by the Al Khalifa dictatorial rulers, did not allow a proper trial and the judge simply passed on the sentences with no due process of law. The victims of gross injustice are: Nader Ibrahim Abdul Imam, 32 from Jidhafs (member of the the Committee of Activists and Prisoners of Conscience), Hassan Abdul Nabi, 25 from Sitra (Coordinator of the Committee of the Unemployed, who had been kidnapped in the past by the Al Khalifa mercenaries and tortured), Ahmad Al Jaziri, 40 from Daih, Yasser Khalifa, 31 from Jidhafs, Jawad Abdulla Al Salman, 24 from Jidhafs, Qassem Mohammad Khalil, 19 years from Karzakkan, Muhsin Abdulla Al Salman, 23 from Jidhafs and a leading member of the Committee of the Unemployed), Hassan Al Haddad, 25 from Al Muharraq and Mohammad Hassan Ashoor, 21 from Karzakkan. Three others were sentenced in absentia: Abdulla Zain (member of the Committee of the Unemployed, Ali Qambar and Sayyed Ali Sayyed Majeed. The case relates to a demonstration on 25th December 2005 when hundreds of people demonstrated peacefully at the airport demanding the release of Ayatullah Sheikh Mohammad Sanad who had been detained upon his arrival from abroad. The arrest of the senior cleric came two months after he had called upon the United Nations to intervene in support the right of the people of Bahrain to determine their destiny.

Another group is awaiting similar verdicts from the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship in relation to the same case. They are: Atif Mahdi Ahmad, 24 from Juffair, Yousif Ahmad Hussain, 27 from Al Ma'amir and a member of the Committee of the Unemployed, Fakhri Abdulla, 40 from Sanabis, Nasser Ali Nasser, 33 from Ras Rumman, Mohammad Majeed Al Jishi, 24 from Manama, Ismail Hassan Makki from Jidhafs and Abdul Amir Madan, 25 from Al Ma'amir.

The hostages have been selectively arrested for their activism in other committees. Of these, four had taken refuge at the UN office in Manama last December: Hassan Abdul Nabi Al Haddad, Nader Abdul Imam and Muhsin Al Salman. They sought protection from the state terrorism being adopted by the Al Khalifa ruling family. The sentences are thus seen as a revenge and score-settling by this oppressive regime.

On another not, one of the most important document has been launched in Bahrain by the newly-established movement

(Haqq). The document which has been put to the people for signatures is a popular petition addressed to the United Nations to take steps to assist the people of Bahrain to determine their destiny. Tens of thousands have flocked to sign the petition after it had been signed by senior political figures representing all tendencies of the Bahraini society; Shia, Sunni, Islamists and liberals. Senior religious scholars such as Ayatullah Sheikh Mohammad Sanad and Sheikh Hussain Najati, have signed the petition which will eventually be forwarded to the Secretary General, Kofi Annan.

The launching of the petition is seen as a strategic shift in the opinion of the people of Bahrain who, in 1970, voted for the independence of the country and the establishment of a working democracy under the Al Khalifa rule. Sheikh Hamad's

act in 2002 of repealing the 1973 constitution is seen by the people as unilateral decision by the Al Khalifa ruling family to relieve themselves of the obligations mutually agreed between themselves and the people of Bahrain.

The country has thus been subjected to a new and more dangerous state of confusion relating not to security, but to political legitimacy. There is now deep-rooted fear that the Al Khalifa hereditary dictatorship may resort to severe repression and acts of revenge against senior figures who are challenging its authoritarian rule and wide-spread corruption. The next few days may see further acts of aggression as Sheikh Hamad and his clique celebrate the forth anniversary of the repealing of the 1973 constitution and the imposition of the Al Khalifa illegal code.

Testimonies on the event at the Bahrain Airport incident

The verdict against 21 Bahraini young men by the Al Khalifa has enraged human rights observers inside and outside the country. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging between one and two years. The Bahrain Centre for Human Rights followed the trial of 21 activists. The following are updates of court sessions on 23rd and 30th January 2006 .

Eighteen people are currently in custody following the airport incident which was sparked by the arrest of cleric Sheikh Mohammed Sanad who called for a referendum supervised by the United Nations on the legitimacy of the political regime. Sheikh Mohammed was later released.

Details of the 23 January session

Seven men appeared for the second time before the Lower Criminal Court on charges relating to violent clashes during a demonstration at the airport on December 25th. Nader Ebrahim AbdulEmam, aged 32, Hasan Abdulnabi, 25, Bader Ahmed Al Jazeri, 40, Yasser Khalifa, 31, Jawad Al Salman, 24, Hasan Majeed Al Jashi, 20 and Qasim Hasan Khaeel, 19, all deny the charges.

They each face three charges, damaging public property, assaulting police and causing a disturbance in a public place, and taking part in an illegal gathering. Each could face up to seven years in prison if convicted of all the charges, said their lawyer Mohammed Al Mutawa. He said the court had so far only addressed the damage issue.

The airport demonstration was sparked by the arrest of cleric Sheikh Mohammed Sanad on his return from Iran. Sheikh Mohammed was later released. Eight witnesses testified at the hearing. Four said that airport property was damaged by crowds trying to flee the arrivals area and was not deliberately sabotaged. Witnesses

also claimed that riot police assaulted demonstrators and caused additional damage to airport property in the melee.

Judge Ebrahim Sultan Al Zayed adjourned the case until February 4th, when he said a CD purporting to contain photographic evidence taken during the clashes would be shown by the defence.

Salmaniya Medical Complex reports of more than 10 people who were allegedly injured by police will also be submitted at the hearing. Witness Zahra Muradi, from Muharraq, told the court that the violence was started by security forces. She said she was paying her telephone bill at the Batelco outlet at the airport when the demonstration began.

Riot police advanced from both sides on protesters who were sitting on the floor and a stampede occurred as people rushed to leave via the sole exit, said witness Ali Salman.

Mr. Salman claimed the damage to airport property was caused during the stampede and that riot police assaulted protesters in the car park of the airport. Mr. Al Mutawa said outside the court that there was no evidence to support the charge that any of his clients damage airport property.

All seven were further remanded in custody until the next hearing. They did not seek bail, but were allowed a brief reunion with relatives at the court complex.

Zainab Ahmed Rashid, aged 50, and Kadhim Khalifa, 55, parents of detainee Yasser Khalifa, 29, were reunited with their son. Ms Rashid had said earlier that she was worried about her son's health because he suffers from bronchial asthma and hemorrhoids. "The last time I saw him was in court on January 7th. He just looked tired. Of course, how can someone go to prison and come out looking comfortable?"

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Sectarianism and the National Union Committee "No Sunni, No Shia, We are all against"

It comes as no surprise that the recent sectarian violence in Iraq would have repercussions here in Bahrain. Both countries have a Shia majority but have been politically dominated by the minority Sunnis; and both countries are now trying to establish themselves as something that looks like a democracy.

On Friday afternoon tens of thousands of Bahrainis marched from Al Qadam (Burgerland roundabout) to Dana Mall, via Budaiya Highway to demonstrate against the bombing of

the Al Askari shrine in Iraq. It was called by Shaikh Isa Qassim (the top Shia cleric in Bahrain), and the turnout was huge (Montadayat.org has much better photos from high up which give some sense of scale: here and here). The demonstration was in many ways a Shia ritual mourning procession: there were some groups of men symbolically striking their chests:

This is not surprising as it was also the anniversary of the death of Imam Zainulabideen for which such processions are usually held. Much of what went on at the



"No Sunni, No Shia, We are all against "exclusivists"

demonstration suggested that this was about Shias viewing themselves as the victim, which is expected. One of the groups near the front of the procession were singing a slogan in which they explicitly identified themselves using the term "Shia of Haidar."

However there was also much about the march which suggested a more inclusive opposition to sectarianism. Rather than stressing the victimization of the Shia, Shaikh Isa Qassem in his speech highlighted the solidarity between Sunnis and Shias. And there were lots of people with placards and chanting slogans of "No Shia, no Sunni. All of us denounce the exclusivists/terrorists"

The sectarian violence in Iraq has reminded people of the Sunni-Shia mistrust that exists in Bahrain, no matter how much we try to deny it. Many political players caught on to this and issued statements of solidarity between the two sects. Al Wafaq (Shia) and Al Wasat (Sunni) political parties got together two nights ago to hold a public seminar on the subject. And the Haq Movement

announced that it will soon commence a public campaign under the slogan "Together against sectarianism and exclusivist ideologies; We are brothers in God and nation."

So as tragic as the recent events in Iraq are, the silver lining is that it has brought to the fore the sectarian tensions in Bahrain and the need to resolve them before the situation gets out of hand. I hope that the civil and political societies make use of this momentum to achieve tangible and permanent changes. I think that something similar to the National Union Committee (NUC) of 1954 is greatly needed right now. There are currently lots of places where Shias and Sunnis are cooperating with each other, such as within the various secular political and civil societies, or the political alliance among the four boycotting parties. But in each of these cases the Sunni-Shia alliance is merely incidental to the main agenda or platform. For the NUC however, the Sunni-Shia alliance was a central part of its identity and strategy, and the source of much of its power. Such a committee today need not necessarily be as political or confrontational as the NUC of 1954, but should maintain an express agenda of spreading grassroots awareness of how sectarian division weakens either community.

I am a bit surprised that such an alliance has not already been created. But I'm hoping that the images of violence in Iraq will (ironically) provide the push and the goodwill to set up such a movement now.

From Chan'ad Bahraini website

Testimonies on the event of the Airport : Continued from P 3

"I saw him here today. He was crying." Ms Rashid said her son's children Ammar, 11, and Bayan, five, had not been told their father was in custody, but they constantly asked about him. "They ask about their father and we tell them he's travelling; how do you tell a five-year-old his father is in prison?" she said. "Even Ammar doesn't know. What does an 11-year-old understand about these things?"

Details of the session on 30January

A judge yesterday ordered police to take three hunger-striking Bahraini prisoners to hospital for treatment. The men on trial, have been on hunger strike since Friday, they told a Lower Criminal Court judge yesterday. Mohsin Abdulla Al Salman, 23, Hassan Hamad Al Haddad, 25, and Ismail Hassan Makki said they had been refusing food and drink for four consecutive days, to protest their innocence and demand their release.

They each face three charges, damaging public property, assaulting police and causing a disturbance in a public place and, thirdly, taking part in an illegal gathering.

The men alleged in court that they had been mistreated in custody and that officials had interfered with their religious practices. Detainees were only being

given one 'turba' (clay pallet used during prayer), even though their families sent them at least five, Makki told the judge. Officials are interfering with detainees' religious rights, which are human rights, said Makki.

Defence lawyers Ahmed Al Arayedh, Shahzalan Al Khamees and Mohammed Al Mutawa asked that all three be released on bail, but this was refused. They also asked that the men be taken for treatment at Salmaniya Medical Complex (SMC), on the basis that the Interior Ministry clinic was not equipped to treat them. Their physical condition has seriously deteriorated while in prison, Ms. Al Khamees told Judge Ebrahim Sultan Al Zayed.

Judge Al Zayed ordered that they be taken to the SMC for treatment and that they be provided with whatever religious facilities they need. The lawyers also asked the judge to order that the three be tried together with seven other defendants, who appeared earlier on similar charges. Judge Al Zayed agreed and all 10 will now appear together before the court on Saturday.

A CD containing photographic evidence taken during the clashes, brought by the detainees' lawyers and video of the incident submitted by the prosecution, will be shown at Saturday's hearing, lawyers said. They said they would also submit medical

reports from the SMC on more than 10 people, who were allegedly beaten by riot police.

Detainees briefly met with families, supporters, activists and religious figures, who gathered in the waiting area outside the court yesterday. Supporters also rallied outside the Public Prosecution in the Diplomatic Area, carrying placards and photographs of detainees as well as addressing passers by via loud speaker.

The 17 men arrested on charges relating to the airport clash were originally being tried in separate groups- two groups of seven men and one group of three.

Mr. Al Salman, Mr. Al Haddad, and Mr. Makki will now join Nader Ebrahim Abdulemam, 32, Hasan Abdulnabi, 25, Bader Ahmed Al Jazeri, 40, Yasser Khalifa, 31, Jawad Al Salman, 24, Hasan Majeed Al Jashi, 20 and Qasim Hasan Khaleel, 19, for a hearing on February 4.

Atif Mahdi Ahmed, Yousif Ahmed Husain, 27, Fakari Abdulla, 40, Nasser Ali Nasser, 33, Mohammed Majeed Aljeshi, 24, and Abdulameer Madan, 23, Mohammed Hassan Ashor, 21, are said to be due in court on Sunday.

It is understood that lawyers may seek to have all 17 men tried together, since they face similar charges. Arrest warrants have been issued for three other men, lawyers confirmed